

# All about the Subbetica

October 2011

A 16-page Olive Press special supplement



## Super Subbetica

*Jon Clarke takes a wander around the evocative historic region said to be the dead centre of Andalusia*



I AM sitting on the beach watching my children play with a bucket and spade, while looking out across, well, row upon row of olive trees to be exact.

For we are in Cordoba province, beside Andalusia's largest man-made reservoir with the Mediterranean about an hour to the south.

The place is Iznajar - the gateway to the stunning Subbetica region - and a true picture postcard town, easily rivalling Ronda or Vejer de la Frontera say, for scenery.

Peace personified, Iznajar sits on a rocky outcrop that erupts out of the lake, which is some 30kms in length and straddles the three provinces of Cordoba, Malaga and Granada.

There is hardly a house, let alone block of flats or golf course, to ruin the view towards a backdrop of soaring distant mountains.

Known as the Mirador of the River Genil valley, it is hardly surprising then that Iznajar - and the Subbetica region as a whole - is fast becoming one of those super-cool, secret destinations to name drop at your next dinner party.

It certainly seems to be the case, sitting down to a candlelit dinner in the pebbled courtyard of the atmospheric hotel Cortijo La Haza in the rolling hinterland near the town.

But it is not the superb restoration of this 250-year-old farmhouse, nor the delicious fish stew or meatloaf cooked to a tee by chef and owner Belgian Patriek Defauw, that comes as the biggest surprise.

The thing that really catches the eye is the clientele, who include among the Monday night throng, two British judges from Leeds.

Regular visitors to the area, where they both have holiday homes, they have grown to love its

**STUNNING:** A panoramic view of the Subbetica over Lake Iznajar, while (insert top) a fountain in Priego

Turn to Page 2



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## 2 Subbética special

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haunting landscape and fascinating historic towns. "It is a great spot to get away from the Rat Race and we love the countryside and peace," explains Judge Mark, who prefers not to give his surname. "We are slowly getting to know the Subbética and love what we have found." Other interesting residents include the former captain of Wasps rugby team, who once played for the All Blacks, as well as Peter Reynolds, a former British Defence Attachee in Argentina.

# All Blacks and yoga



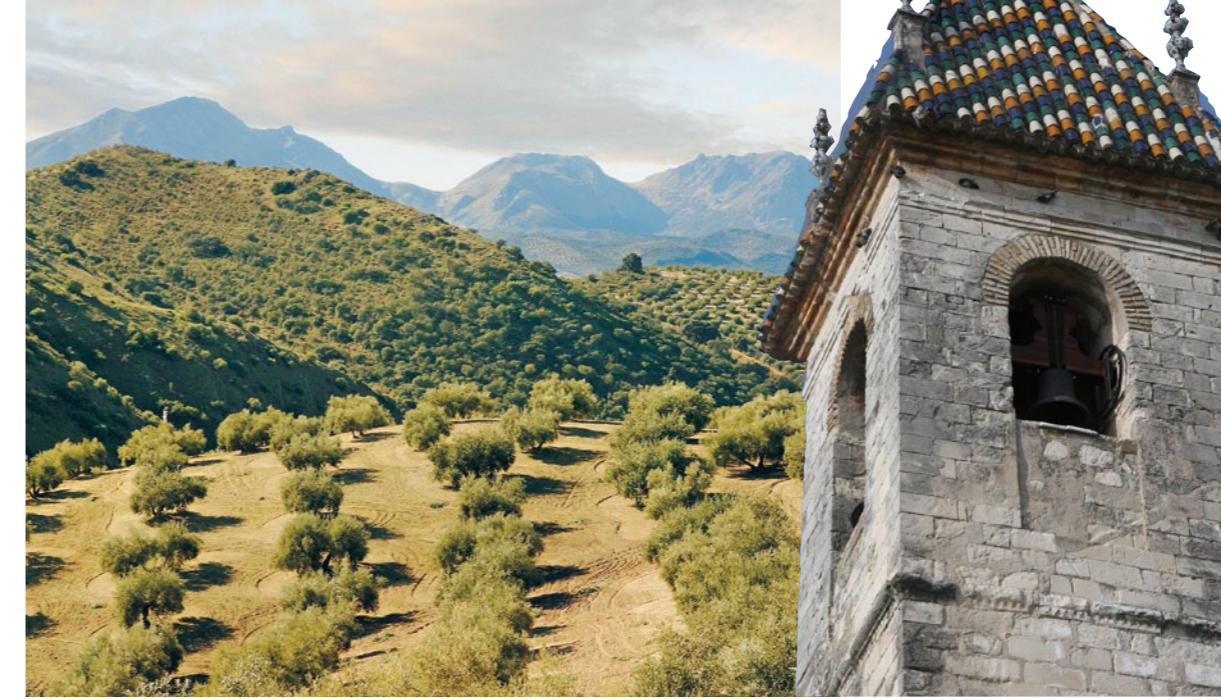
**SURPRISES:** A charming square in Lucena

**It lends credence to the fact that Iznajar had a thriving theatre culture**

"We are absolutely mountain people but we like the sea as well, so looking over the lake is a major bonus," explained the former Royal Marine, who has lived with his wife yoga teacher Marilyn near Iznajar for seven years. Iznajar is a typical town of the area, which is full of Moorish castles and Roman remains.

Originally a prehistoric settlement, its fortunes changed in the 7th Century when Arab settlers built a castle on the promontary and named it Hins Ashar. It is a wonderful place to visit, particularly in the evening, as the hot Andalusian sun starts to drop its last rays giving an ethereal light to the palm tree and the historic houses around the old castle. The locals drift to and fro, many dropping into the impressive Church of Santiago, which was built in the 17th Century and has a beautiful baroque chapel behind the altar. On leaving the church you stroll past a small square called the Patio de las Comedias which lends credence to the fact that back in Arabic days, Iznajar had a thriving

## 3 Subbética special



**BEAUTY:** The landscape between Iznajar and Priego de Córdoba, which has some of the best olive oil in the world, while (right) an ornate church tower in central Lucena

theatre culture. It is a pretty site, beautifully kept by its proud neighbours, who bedeck its walls with blue flower pots full of geraniums. It is a similar, indeed much magnified story in the pretty Barrio de la Villa in the heart of Priego de Córdoba, a lovely 30 minute drive north of Iznajar through rolling olive groves and past romantic ruined farmhouses.

Plazuela de San Antonio. Little changed since Moorish times, it is fringed by the fabulous Balcon de Adarve walkway, offering spectacular views and three deliciously fresh drinking fountains - hence the name 'city of water'.

Priego itself first became known in Roman times as the cattle town of Rueda, which came under the jurisdiction of nearby Carcabuey, itself an attractive castle-topped settlement, well worth a visit. While nowadays few cows wander the area, it has become well known for its goats, and in particular olive oil.

Capital of the Subbética, Priego is a great place to spend a weekend. Sitting on the edge of the 32,000-hectare Subbética Natural Park, it has a contented self-contained air about it. Celebrated since Roman times - a fact now proved by the discovery of a wealthy merchant's house in Almedinilla - the Subbética region has three of Spain's top appellations for oil, the denomination de origen (of DO's) of Lucena, Priego and Baena. One olive oil producer Benito Serrano, from Priego, explains: "The olive oil here in Priego is the best in Spain. It is clean and fruity and great with bread and salads."

And, incredibly, despite its amazing scenery and abundance of stunning churches and architecture, it remains an overwhelmingly Spanish town, with few expats living in the area and tourists still something of a sideshow, apart from in May when they descend for the celebrated Domingos de Mayo festival. Declared of national touristic importance, these ancient processions, which take place each Sunday, are stunning and first began in 1642.

Complex oils - many of them 100 per cent organic - is at the HQ of award-winning oil maker Vizcantar. Here, owner Fermin can organise a fantastic value 'tasting' session, replete with tapas, wine and water, for a bargain 20 euros a couple. A passionate, well travelled man, his family have made olive oil for decades and one of his fincas, near the town of Almedinilla, counts no less than five so-called 'milenario' trees, each of them over 1000 years old. These stunning trees, which can be visited by special request, still incredibly bear fruit each year and Fermin is currently in the process of creating a special brand of oil just made from the five trees. "There won't be much oil," he explains. "But it will be among the world's best and will certainly have its own unique selling point."

Other notable produce is the fabulous goats cheese made around Zuheros, while in Lucena you must stop to try the fabulously flinty sherry-like wines of Torres Burgos. Part of the Montilla-Moriles denomination, the huge bodega in the centre of town is difficult to miss and counts thousands of oak barrels of Palomino and Pedro Ximenez wines, blended in the classic 'solera' system, so typical of the sherries of Jerez. Best of all, is its wonderful Amontillado, which effectively means 'of Montilla', a fabulously nutty, straw-coloured blend over 100 years in age, which is now being snapped up by the Chinese, no less, for over 100 euros a bottle. As they only produce 3000 bottles a year and the Chinese are importing the whole lot, it is creating a very exclusive market over there. There were, as it happens, a few bottles for sale at the bodega, but I opted for a mixed case of other chestnuts, all of them coming in at under a fiver. Viva la Subbética.

**Celebrated since Roman times, the olive oil in Priego is the best in Spain**

A brilliant way to try the mixture of rich and complex oils - many of them 100 per cent organic - is at the HQ of award-winning oil maker Vizcantar. Here, owner Fermin can organise a fantastic value 'tasting' session, replete with tapas, wine and water, for a bargain 20 euros a couple. A passionate, well travelled man, his family have made olive oil for decades and one of his fincas, near the town of Almedinilla, counts no less than five so-called 'milenario' trees, each of them over 1000 years old. These stunning trees, which can be visited by special request, still incredibly bear fruit each year and Fermin is currently in the process of creating a special brand of oil just made from the five trees. "There won't be much oil," he explains. "But it will be among the world's best and will certainly have its own unique selling point."



**A HIKING PARTY:** Goatherd takes a walk along the via verde

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## The magnificent 14



THE Subbetica is described as the 'geographical centre of Andalucia' for its close proximity to the Costa del Sol, Cordoba and Granada. There are a total of 14 historic towns and villages, all administered by the very capable Mancomunidad de la Sierra, based in Carcabuey. At one end of the region you will find the hilltop town of Benameji, which is known for its white-water rafting and sturdy

ancient bridge, while at the other you might visit Dona Mencía, which is known for its wines, sitting on the edge of the Montilla-Moriles denomination. Luque is a charming spot with a fantastic main square and castle, while Almedinilla is a pretty village, known for its fabulous Roman villa and ancient Iberian settlement high up on an escarpment above the town.

**HISTORIC:** Castle in Zuheros and bridge in Benameji



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# Subbetica special



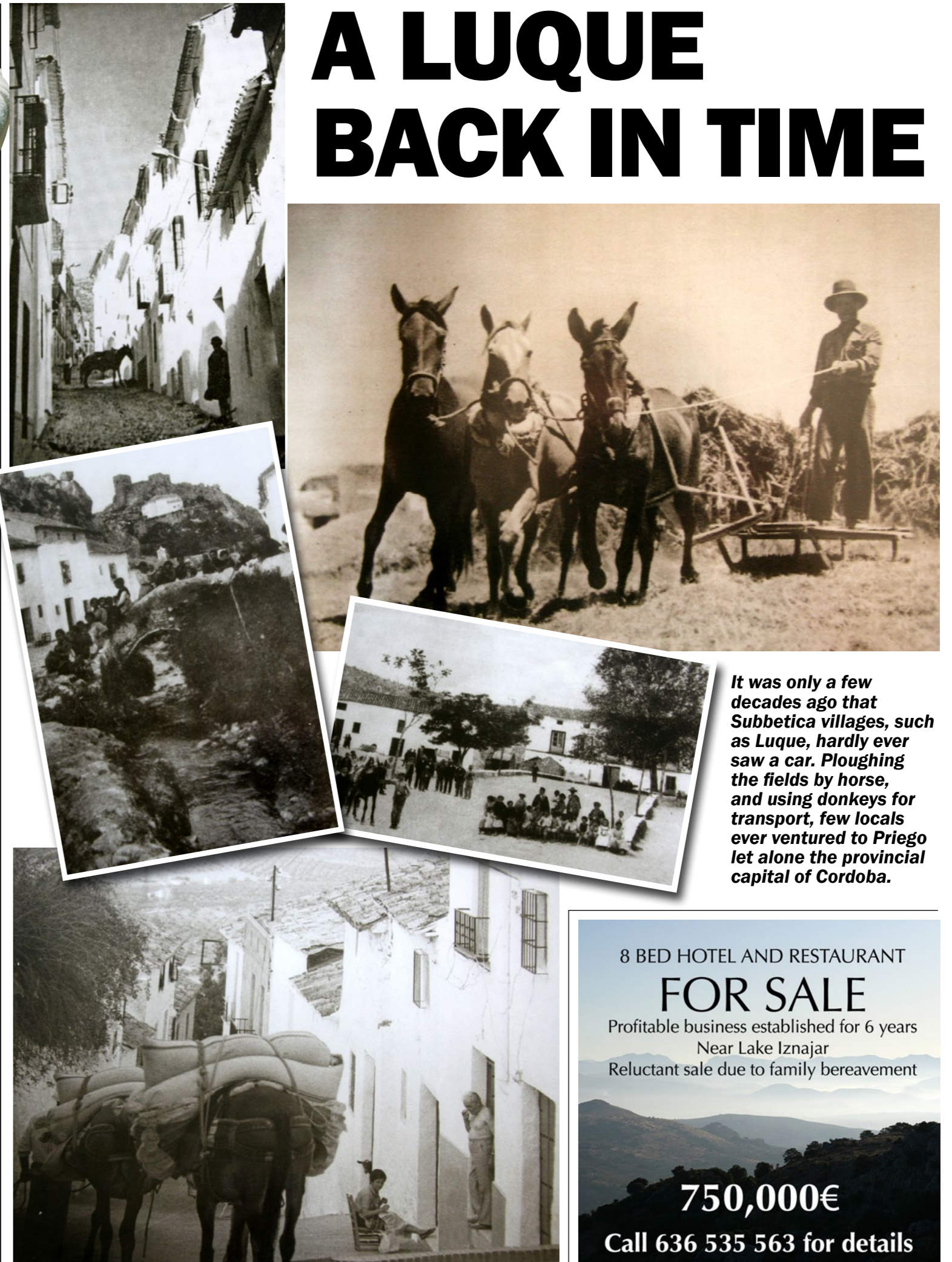
**INFLUENTIAL:** Statue of an Arabic poet in Cabra, known for his 'erotic' overtures

Zuheros though is one of the true gems of Andalucia sitting high on a promontory and backed by a backdrop of cliffs and a gorge. Little-known and little-visited, the cluster of whitewashed houses tumble down to an old Moorish castle built on and into a steep rock face. The town, which still has a distinct frontier feel to it, is perhaps best known for its fabulous goats cheeses. There are around 10,000 goats living in the park, according to local restaurant owner Rafael Arroyo, and one highly-rated factory Balanchares, which wins many awards.

### Cabra was also the home of a Moorish poet who became renowned for his 'erotic' love songs

Another massive surprise is Cabra, said to be one of the friendliest towns in Andalucia, despite counting on 22,000 residents. Head up to the castle (which is now a school) and wander through the old town with its winding streets, full of Baroque buildings, with rejas and bedecked in geraniums. In particular, look for the Iglesia de la Asuncion, which is built over a mosque, and the church of San Juan Bautista, which is Visigothic in origin and said to be one of the oldest churches in Spain. Cabra was also the home of a Moorish poet, who became renowned for his 'erotic' love songs in the 11th century. Known as 'the blind man of Cabra', there is a statue of him up by the castle. Rute is the biggest surprise of all. This workaday town - seemingly spreading in all directions - is home to a charming central core and by far the region's best museums, including one for anis and another for turon.

# A LUQUE BACK IN TIME



It was only a few decades ago that Subbetica villages, such as Luque, hardly ever saw a car. Ploughing the fields by horse, and using donkeys for transport, few locals ever ventured to Priego let alone the provincial capital of Cordoba.

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## 6 Subbetica special



Biking into the Subbetica on the Via Verde is a great way to see the region

PIT STOP: Cyclists pass by the evocative Nicol's restaurant (while right) its interior

# Wheely good time

ONE of the best ways to see the Subbetica is to walk or cycle along the 'via verde' (or the green route), which takes you right into the heart of the park. The 58km route follows the old line of the *Tren de Aceite* (olive oil train) which has now been transformed into a rambling and biking track, lined

with fabulous scenery. The route links the villages of Puente Genil, Lucena, Cabra, Doña Mencía, Zuheros and Luque, all of which make delightful stopping points. Along the way you'll see plenty of well-preserved railway architecture, such as bridges, tunnels and stations. But, best of all you will see some of the most beautiful



## 7 Subbetica special

countryside with views in all directions. Some of the stations have even been transformed into bars, restaurants and information centres. At its eastern end you will find the Laguna del Conde, the largest lagoon in the Subbetica with a wealth of wildlife.

**Luque is spread out below a rocky outcrop topped by the ruins of a Moorish castle**

It is close to the pretty village of Luque, which is spread out below a rocky outcrop topped by the ruins of a Moorish castle, which is well-worth a visit. At the other end of the track lies the large town of Lucena, known for its historical churches and a great place to refuel in one of its many tapas bars and restaurants. Even further east should you want a few extra kilometres is

Puente Genil, which is one of the oldest towns in Cordoba and has plenty of sites worth visiting. The best stops for the night are either side of Zuheros, with the lovely new hotel Las Castillarejos, which has stunning views and an extremely friendly owner Paulino, whose family are in the olive oil

trade in Luque. Alternatively stay at the amazing historic Hacienda Minerva, which is a beautifully conserved and renovated olive mill, with its own restaurant. Tours can be organised by adventure company Subbetica Natural, which can sort out bikes on the ground and all other local arrangements.



ACTIVITY: Companies like Subbetica Natural can organise biking and rafting trips

## Up into the hills

PERFECTLY sited between Granada, Cordoba and Malaga, it is no surprise that many people choose to come to the Subbetica National Park for a walking holiday. Comprising nearly 32,000 hectares and rising to the peak of La Tinosa, which sits at 1568m, the area is brimming with great walks and scenery.

This is part of the ragged rambling spur of the Cordillera Bética, the youngest of the Iberian mountains. While there are some wonderful walks from Cabra, Luque and Almedinilla, the best walking terrain is found around Priego and Zuheros. Sitting in a commanding position high up on a limestone slope, Zuheros is the northern gateway to the Natural Park.

There are numerous circular walks around the village so there is no need to fuss with transport.

One of the most important results of the massive limestone erosion in the area has been the formation of the cave above Zuheros, known as La Cueva de los Murciélagos, home to Neolithic man, and with some important cave paintings.

The excavation of the cave has provided valuable information about the changing lifestyle of these hunter-gatherers.

Another of the outstanding effects of the dissolution of the limestone is the formation of the Bailón Gorge. This river was for the most part subterranean at the beginning of the Pleistocene era (1.6 million years ago), but over thousands of years the roof collapsed and the massive boulders that can be seen in the river bed are evidence of this force of nature.

There are a total of seven walking routes around Zuheros varying from

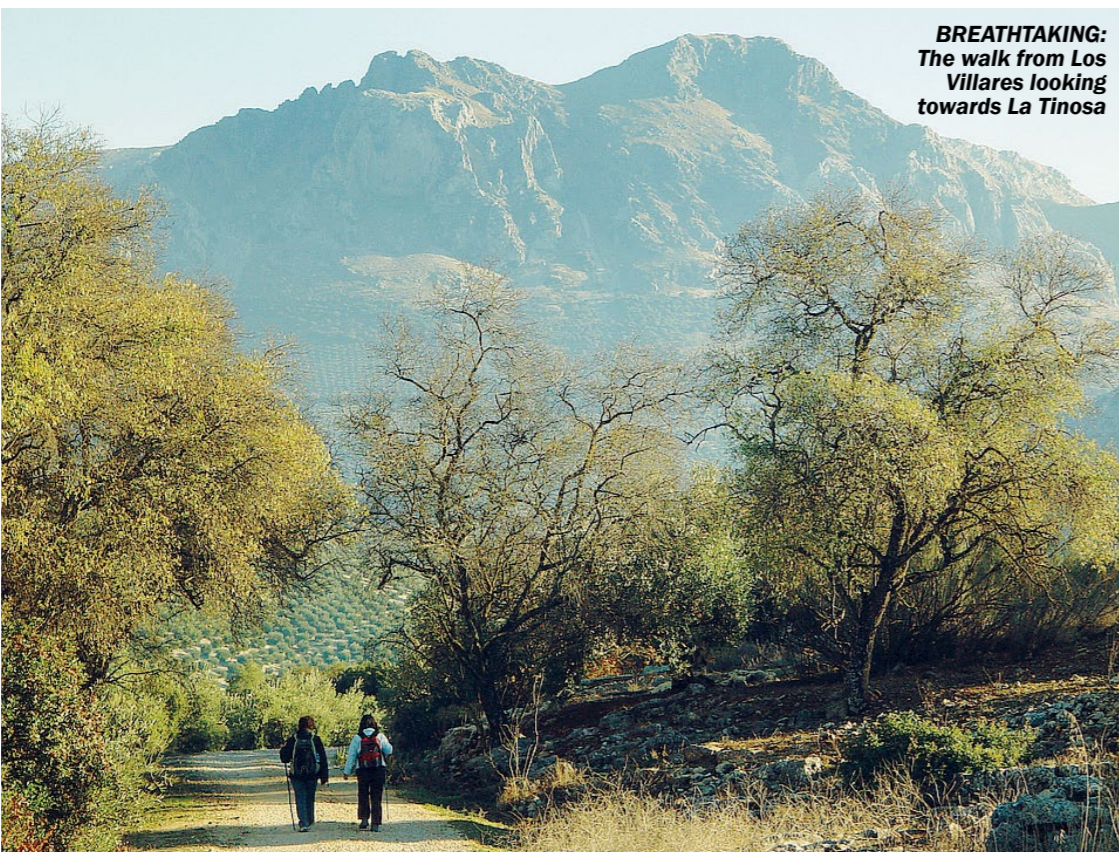
**There are numerous hiking routes in the Subbetica, writes Clive Jarman**

short half day excursions to full day's outings of up to 20kms for experienced walkers. The classic walk of about 14kms starts at the bottom of the village, heads south up the gorge, crossing

the river five times and circles the Cerro de Bramadero to return back to the square for a well earned drink. In Priego there are some excellent routes, the best known being the ascent to the summit of La Tinosa,

(see picture below and description right) at 1568m, not very far in terms of distance but there's a great deal of 'up'.

**BREATHTAKING: The walk from Los Villares looking towards La Tinosa**



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This great circular walk of 14kms passes by the two highest peaks in Cordoba, Pico de Bermejo and La Tinosa (complete with its 'letter box'). After a steady climb the walker is rewarded with amazing panoramas in all directions. On the peak of Bermejo, you will find the remains of an old Muslim castle Jardin del Moro, while below the sad looking ruin of Cortijo de Vichira. Keep your eyes peeled for both Bonelli's and Booted eagles.

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**CITY OF WATER:** Priego's fountains and (right) a square in the old Moorish quarter

# 8 Subbetica special



It is known as the Jewel of Cordoba Baroque, and it is clear to see why. The stunning town of Priego de Cordoba boasts a fabulous array of Baroque-style architecture, nothing matching the incredible interior of the Church of Nuestra Senora la Asuncion.

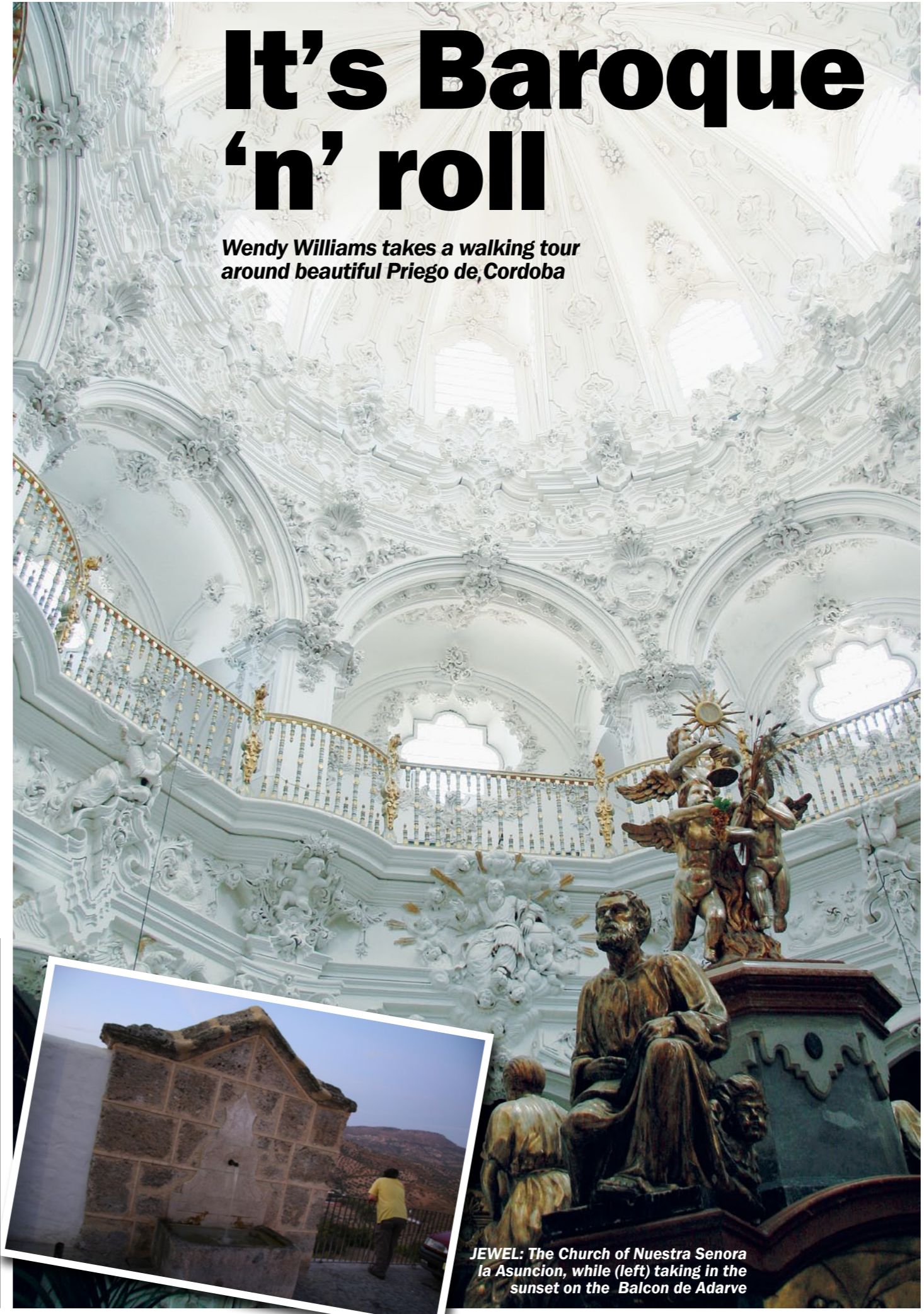
Like an inverted wedding cake, its luminosity and detail literally took my breath away. It was the most uplifting experience to come across the chapel off the main body of the church.

### Stroll through the old Moorish quarter with its maze of narrow streets

Begun in the early 16th century, the co-called sacristy became one of the masterpieces of Spanish Baroque created between 1772 and 1784. But Priego generally is the home of amazing churches. Most of which are examples of Baroque architecture at its finest. Throughout history Priego has been an important town strategically and there was a settlement here since the third millennium BC.

Today one of the highlights is still a stroll through the old Moorish quarter with its maze of narrow streets and white-washed walls. But it was in the 18th century that the town reached its artistic peak due to the success of its textile industry. A walk down Calle del Rio opposite the town hall will reveal 18th-century mansions, once the homes of silk merchants. And at the end of the street is the Fuente del Rey which is a

good starting point for a stroll around the town. The Fuente del Rey (Fountain of the King), restored in its current form in 1803, features beautiful sculptures arranged in three pools with 139 shoots of water, and centred on the figure of King Neptune, riding the waves with his wife Amphitrite in a chariot pulled by a pair of horses. The Carnicerías Reales, the former slaughterhouse and meat market which was built by the town council between 1576 and 1579. The castle was originally a Moorish fortress but underwent constant development from the ninth to the 15th centuries. From the top of the main tower the Torre del Homenaje, you get a wonderful aerial view of the whole fortress and the beautiful Barrio de la Villa below. But be careful of the pigeons at the top of the other tower who seem to have made it their coop.



# It's Baroque 'n' roll

Wendy Williams takes a walking tour around beautiful Priego de Cordoba



**JEWEL:** The Church of Nuestra Senora la Asuncion, while (left) taking in the sunset on the Balcon de Adarve

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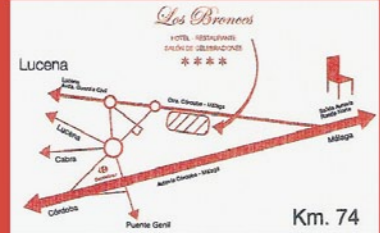
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10 **Subbética special**



# Lucena:

ON first glance an ugly town, Lucena is extremely underrated as a place to visit. Its success story is also the reason for its ugliness, for the town is now ringed with hundreds of furniture factories and emporiums, said to number around 450 in total. The growth of the furniture industry has turned it into

## Toast the hosts

HAVING worked in the tourist business and owned a small mountain escape in Granada for years, it was perhaps only a matter of time before Patriek and Bernadette Defauw opened a rural B&B over here. The former Eurostar duty managers, who both worked in the hotel business for years, have turned around the casa rural Cortijo La Haza, near Iznajar. With a love of Spanish and a deep knowledge of the region they have fast become some of the area's best hosts. "We knew we did not want to spend the rest of our lives in London," explains Patriek, who ran a hotel in Bruges for many years. A keen chef he is now knocking out some of the finest food in the Iznajar area, a fact

proved by the regular returning custom. "Many of our guests are now in their fifth year" says Bernadette. "So we must be doing something right." [www.cortijolahaza.com](http://www.cortijolahaza.com)



CONTENT: Patriek and Bernadette

## Subbética special

# Rags to riches

Cordoba's second biggest town, not to mention one of Andalucía's most prosperous. While the recession is definitely taking its toll with dozens of factories shutting over the last few years, it's generally a remarkable turnaround for a place once described by writer, Gerald Brenan, as one of the poorest towns in Andalucía.

**Jon Clarke is impressed with the turnaround of the town once described as one of Andalucía's poorest**

**It has plenty to offer in terms of sites and is a nice place for a wander in the evening**

Many of its olive groves and vineyards have been pulled down to make way for new



factories, not to mention suburbs, and it counts the largest discoteque in Andalucía, so claim its locals, not to mention the world's largest chair, which at six metres tall sits outside the Hermanos Huertas factory on the ring road.

Once you get inside the town, formerly known as Eliossana or Perla de Se-farad in Arabic times, it is actually a wonderful place to spend a morning. It has plenty to offer in terms of sites - and particularly restaurants - and is a nice place for a wander, with its shady squares full of children playing, particularly at paseo time in the evening. In particular make sure to visit the baroque church of San Mateo, with its Sagrario chapel, which has exquisite

**HEADY MIX: From fine amontillado wine at Torres Burgos to a church and castle in Lucena**

site plasterwork and a magnificent encrusted marble entrance. During the middle ages, the Jewish community in Lucena was one of the most prosperous in Spain and parts of it are still around to visit. Other monuments include the 17th century church of San Agustín with a unique oval layout and domed tower, and the Church and Hospital of San Juan de Dios, with a marble entrance

and Baroque altarpiece. Most interesting is the restored Castillo del Moral, where one of the last Arabic leaders of Spain, Boabdil, was held in 1483 after being captured by Isabella. Near to Lucena is a hermitage known as Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Araceli with a fine baroque chapel, and from here the views are exceptional.

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*The best meat, fish and pasta in the Subbética*

## Righting the wrongs

HE spent many years refurbishing grade 1 listed properties throughout the south coast of England, as well as building blocks of flats and schools. So converting and shoring up old buildings in Andalucía comes easily to Marc Phillips, of EBS construction (GIB). "I spend a lot of my time righting the problems of expatriates," he explains. "It is incredible how many people get turned over by local building companies. One of the properties we are working on right now had signs of movement and on further investigation we discovered it had less than a couple of centimetres of foundations, which meant it is hardly a surprise that it is sinking

**Builder Marc Phillips is trying his best to shore up the Subbética's properties in the greenest possible way**

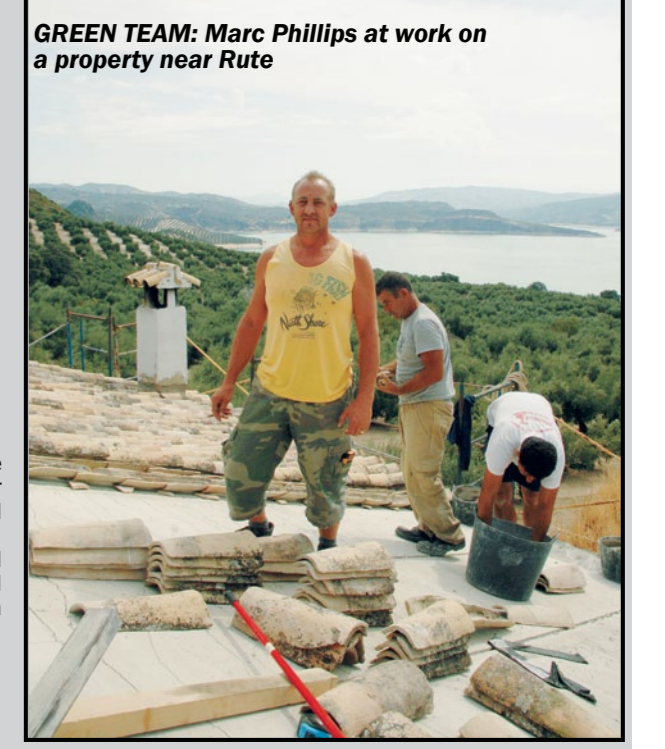
down the mountainside." The father-of-two, who lives in Iznajar, has now teamed up with British underpinning and piling specialist Roger Bullivent, which has now opened offices in Gibraltar and Estepona. Apart from general building services and structural repairs, Marc also has a particular interest in working as

sustainably as possible. "We try and think about the environment as much as possible, making homes properly insulated and using as many inert materials as we can, and deciding on the right heating solutions. The types of windows installed can all help to reduce our carbon footprint. "We have also become spe-

cialists over the last five years in installing PV solar panels, heat pumps and even wind turbines. "Myself, I live totally off grid with a solar system that I designed and installed with a work colleague"

Contact [ebconstruction@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:ebconstruction@hotmail.co.uk) or call 693505510 for more info.

**GREEN TEAM: Marc Phillips at work on a property near Rute**



PEOPLE OF THE SUBBETICA



EXILED: Alcalá-Zamora

Former president of Spain, Alcalá Zamora was exiled to Argentina after the Civil War and never got to see his homeland again

# Priego's democratic son

HE is one of the Subbetica's best loved sons and one of the most important figures in modern Spanish history. A writer, lawyer and politician, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora (1877 - 1949) from Priego de Córdoba went on to become the first president of the Second Republic. A member of parliament from 1906 until 1923, twice holding cabinet rank - as

Minister for Development in 1917, and Minister for War in 1922 - he was also Spain's representative in the League of Nations. Above all though, the liberal-minded politician was renowned for his strong democratic beliefs that led him to oppose the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, a forerunner to Franco. In 1930 he led the revolutionary committee formed after the 'Pact of San Sebastián'

and was imprisoned for a year for his role in the failed military uprising in Aragon. He was released after the elections in April 1931 and just two days later became President of the provisional government when the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed on April 14. They were turbulent times however and in April 1936 he was controversially dismissed as President and replaced by Manuel Azana.

By Wendy Williams



EXHIBIT: Alcalá-Zamora's former home is now a museum

Perhaps fortunately for him, when the Civil War broke out a few months later he was on holiday in Scandinavia. Discovering that his home had been broken into and ransacked he decided not to come back to his native Spain. Incidentally, as reported in the Olive Press, a hoard of stolen documents, including his memoirs, were found earlier this year and are due to go on display at the Archivo Histórico Nacional, in Madrid.

## The extra virgin elixir of life

PRIEGO de Córdoba is famous for its olive oil.

And at the highly-rated estate run by Aceites Vizcantar they still pick olives from trees over a thousand years in age.

In total, the family run business - which has won awards in Italy and Argentina as well as the much coveted Medallo de Oro gold medal for intensity of flavour - has three so-called 'millionario' trees.

"We are planning to make a special olive oil picked from just these three trees," reveals boss Fermin Rodriguez Jimenez, 51, who lives in the heart of the 180 hectare estate.

Slowly built up over nearly a decade (his grandfather bought 30 hectares in 1946, while his father bought another 30 in 1975) the company uses the oil from three different types of trees, including Picudo, Picual and Hojiblanca.

As well as producing four different brands of oil, including an organic one, the company produces shampoos, face creams, soaps and even perfume.

It is also regularly organising *catas* - or tastings - and trips can be organised to go out and visit the ancient trees.

"I am working with my whole body and soul to improve our product and we realise that the side products are getting increasingly popular," explains Jimenez.

www.aceitesvizcantar.com

## A lifetime's odyssey

Thanks to the painstaking work of Cabra historian Antonio Moreno (below), Spain has managed to recover the world's biggest discovery of sunken gold



MINTED: Peruvian coins

CABRA-born historian Antonio Moreno Hurtado boasts a career spanning 35 years documenting the history of his town. Indeed, he has published more than a dozen books on Cabra. But it is his crucial role in the battle between Spain and the US 'treasure hunt' company Odyssey that has won him his most widespread recognition.

For thanks to his work, it was ruled last week, that the US firm must return to Spain a hoard of over 590,000 gold and silver coins minted in Peru.

In August 2009, the historian chanced upon documents that proved key to the whole case regarding the frigate Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes, which sunk off the Algarve in 1804.

While sifting through old naval records in research for a book, he discovered a government order dated from 1802 which commanded the Mercedes to bring money back from the Americas.

The seven documents proved that the Mercedes, which was sunk by the British Navy, was travelling under the orders of the crown and not on a commercial voyage as argued by the Florida-based salvage company.

Armed with these documents Spain has now won the historic victory. A three-judge panel at the US Court of Appeals in Atlanta has sided with Spain and ruled that the treasure salvaged by Odyssey in 2007 should be handed back to the Iberian nation. And it is in no small part thanks to Moreno



He never returned to Spain after he discovered his house was ransacked

Alcalá-Zamora spent the last few years of his life in exile in Argentina and never returned to Priego the town he described as like 'a slice of land from the northeast of Spain in the heart of Andalucía.'

In 1986 his daughters, Purificación and Isabel, donated the family home to the town, which has been transformed into a museum.

This fascinating museum - situated in a beautiful, nineteenth century house where he was born - offers visitors a glimpse into the life of this great man and also into a key era in Spanish history.

In a poignant addition, a room upstairs also contains his last pictures, the very couch where he died (imported from Argentina) and the grandfather clock which was stopped at the time of his death.

A new documentary has also now been made about the life of Alcalá-Zamora based on previously unseen footage that was discovered by chance when work was being carried out at the house of Priego's former Republican Mayor Francisco Adame.

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**WHERE TO EAT**

# Hat-trick of quality

**W**ITH its award-winning olive oil, excellent local wines and goats cheeses to die for, it is no surprise that the Subbetica serves up a good range of places to eat. The biggest surprise is the quality of food to be found in the region's biggest town of Lucena.

There is a hat trick of great places to eat in the town, in particular at the award-winning Restaurante Los Bronces, on the outskirts of the town towards Malaga. Opened by enterprising Javier Puerto it has already garnered a much deserved 'red meals' recommendation by the Michelin guide.

This is no surprise for its interesting mix of traditional dishes each coming with their own inspiring twists, such as the dorada served with wonderful cep mushrooms in a fresh tomato sauce. In the heart of town you should look out for the stylish Tres Culturas, set up by two brothers, who spent many

years working in La Rioja. Naturally there is a good selection of wines and the food is equally adventurous and has some tasty twists too. Another slightly more formal option, but with as much panache – and equally busy – is the Italian-style restaurant Via Veneto run by the two Rafaels (father and son).



**INNOVATIVE:** Lucena's **Tres Culturas, Via Veneto and Los Bronces (bottom), while (above) Atalaya**

This friendly pair have a great range of salads, pastas and what could well be the best shoulder of lamb in the Sub-

betica, arriving fresh twice a week from near Burgos. In Zuheros you have two completely varied options. One, the charming, authentic Meson Atalaya in the heart of a town, a friendly, good value, affair, specialising in food from around the region.

**WHERE TO STAY**

**I**T might be described as the classic Andalusian experience.

Taking an arabic bath in my hotel La Casa de los Banos, in the heart of Priego de Cordoba, left me tingling with energy. Indeed, the only thing missing was a harem of wives as I dried myself off after a splendid 20 minute massage and a glass of refreshing mint tea.

The hotel, run by a group of friends from the town, is located in a great spot right in an ancient Moor-

ish back street of the town, with the Cathedral looming over it. Another great option in the heart of Priego old town is Posada Real, which is really a collection of charming town-houses, each with their own peaceful patio. For someone looking for an altogether more rural weekend, few places are as stunning and as well run as Casa Olea.

Indeed, it is no surprise that this wonderful retreat, ten minutes, from Priego has been nominated Andalucia's top B&B on Trip Advisor. Its owner Tim, a former manager at Trailfinders, has a clear understanding of what tourists are after and it is little surprise he is over 80 per cent full for most of the year.

Another beguiling rural retreat sits in breathtaking countryside between Priego and Iznajar, right beside the international GR-7 footpath. Posada de la Nina Margarita is about as quiet as it gets and should definitely win awards for its authentic renovation and laid back style.

Also well renovated is the stunning Hacienda Minerva, in Zuheros, an olive mill, ideal for a romantic escape. Owned by the former regional

# Harem heaven

boss of the left-wing IU party, it is tasteful in the extreme and counts on a great restaurant and well stocked wine cellar, all thanks to the owner's talented son Luis, who previously ran the wine museum in Ojen.

Nearby, just a few clicks up the excellent via verde cycle and walking track in Luque, is newer hotel Las Castillerejos, a joyous, modern retreat, with an environmental bent and incredible views. Expect a tasting of the owner Paulino's incredible extra virgin olive oil, as well as some extremely helpful advice from his staff.

If it is true romance you are looking for then you might want to try Cortijo La Prensa, near Rute, which has been billed as the 'fourth most romantic hotel' in Europe, according to Trip Advisor. Owned by a pair of publishers

from the UK, the place is the definition of luxury and a true oasis of beauty and tranquility. Not quite as grand, but equally romantic and a joy on the stomach is the wonderful Cortijo la Haza, near Iznajar (see page 26). For a more urban city break you should definitely try the fantastic MS Convento Santo Domingo, which sits in a grand townhouse with a beautiful central patio. The perfect location for exploring the nearby backstreets of oldtown Lucena, it serves as a great escape at night. You might also want to try its sister hotel in Cabra, the MS Fuente las Piedras, which sits just outside the town, in expansive grounds, with a big pool.



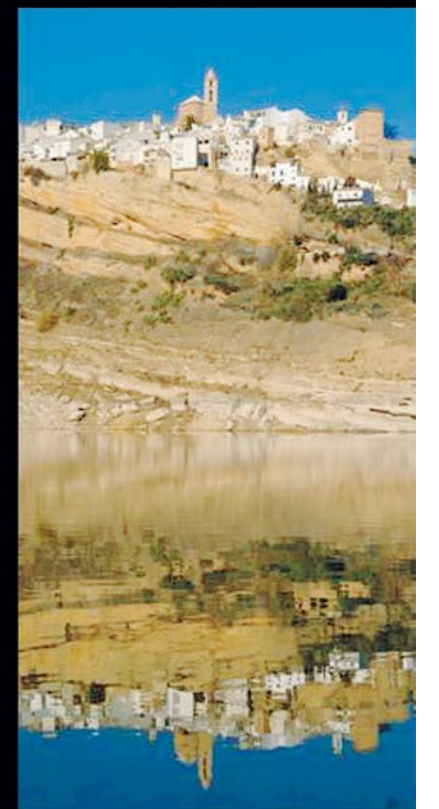
**LAI D BACK:** Posada Nina Margarita, while (left) Convento Santo Domingo

Also worth trying in Cabra is the excellent Hotel Mitra, which is a good location with free wifi and a good restaurant.

Meanwhile in Dona Mencia, the lovely Hotel Mencia is a delightful option, with excellent views across the authentic local landscape. Over in Rute, your best bet is certainly Hotel Mirador, which sits on the edge of town with amazing views. Another good budget option sitting in olive groves and with great mountain scenery is Hotel Sierra de Araceli near Lucena. Finally Casa las Parras is an amazing rural house to rent in Rute, which is currently offering a 20 per cent discount up till December.



# Iznájar



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